

FOUR ASSERTIONS ABOUT CERTIFICATION - ALL OF THEM FALSE -

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There are innumerable interpretations, methodological approaches and discussions about the certification of occupational skills. Vocational training actors of the region are increasingly utilising the principles and methodologies of training and certification based on occupational competencies. Why is the topic receiving so much attention nowadays? How clear are the reasons that have led various public and private agents to implement certification systems?

The present paper has been drafted in an attempt to provide answers to the questions of the preceding paragraph. In its first part it briefly describes the different initiatives that are being developed in the region, trying to describe the “state of the art” in Latin America and the Caribbean in this respect. The second part tackles the central issue and analyses the four assertions usually made about certification that are the cause of frequent debate:

1. Certificates are given out only upon termination of some training activity, after all tests have been passed.
2. Certification procedures favour social exclusion.
3. In certification systems, training institutes have to be segregated from evaluating and certifying bodies.
4. Certification systems solve problems traditionally attributed to training institutions.

To our mind all these allegations lack justification and are therefore to be considered false.

1 By way of introduction: a brief account of experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean

The interest in training and certification based on occupational competencies has been growing in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years. As a matter of fact, even before the advent of the occupational competencies model, Cinterfor promoted a regional project on occupational certification aiming at the formal recognition of labour skills regardless of the way in which they had been acquired.

As a result of a draft project prepared by CINTERFOR/ILO in 1979¹ certification was defined as the “formal recognition of workers’ occupational qualifications regardless of the way in which they have been acquired”.

A good number of experiences are being currently carried out in the discussion, design and implementation of training and certification systems. Four groups can be distinguished:

- vocational training institutions
- governmental sector (Ministries of Labour and Education)
- private undertakings
- trade unions

As may be seen, these groups reflect not only to institutional levels but also to the intents and objectives pursued by certification procedures. Let us look at their main features.

The **Vocational Training Institutions** of Latin America and the Caribbean have specially strived for the modernisation of their programmes on the basis of a competencies or qualifications approach. This method has given them access to new forms of analysing work processes and identifying the knowledge, skills and abilities mobilised by workers. All this was an unparalleled opportunity for updating information about both training and the teaching strategies required to promote such “key” competencies as a capacity for teamwork, personal initiative, safety at work, etc.

More recently, and thanks to the experience of some training bodies, it has become evident that the competencies approach in training also provides a very good possibility for upgrading institutional management. In fact, this method has enabled numerous training agencies to reorganise their response and improve their processes of needs detection, curricular design and evaluation.

There is at present practically no single training institute from Mexico to Argentina that has not tried out some experience in training by occupational competencies, or made it extensive to its labour certification procedures. Their challenge is now to bring about changes allowing to incorporate the new demands for flexibility of programmes in such aspects as recruitment and graduation, and availability of training hours and contents.

In some countries of the region **Ministries of Labour and Education** have also promoted the creation of instruments for the public recognition of occupational skills and abilities in order to facilitate manpower supply and demand exchanges and give greater transparency to labour relations. The government sector has deliberately taken a leading role in regulating training and certification, which in many cases has been reflected in its active encouragement of discussions and national projects of training and certification systems.

The motivations of the public sector cover a wide range of options such as raising the quality and relevance of training, making industrial resources more competitive and heightening transparency under circumstances in which a proliferation of training offers and different types of certificates make it difficult to discern the actual qualifications imparted by training agents, They are also aimed at improving access to training and at recognising abilities acquired during a working lifetime.

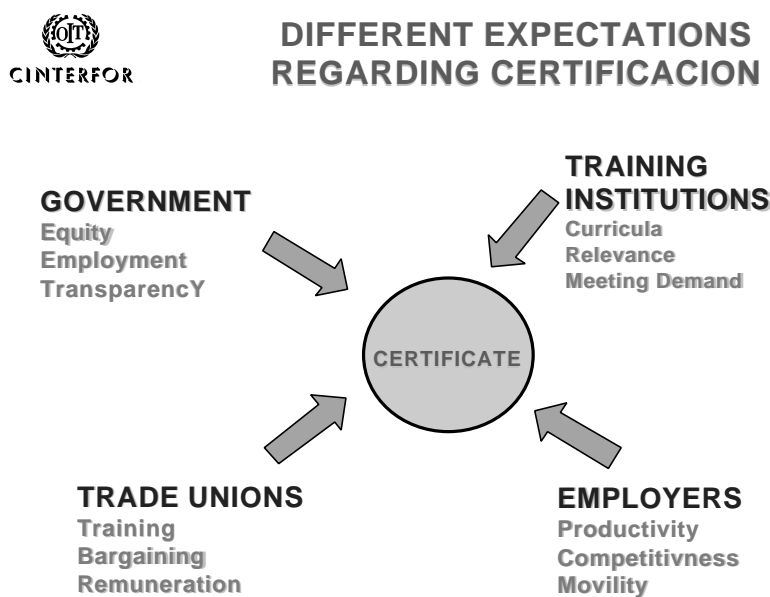
¹ Project DOCREP/SEMINAR 128/1. CINTERFOR/ILO 1979.

In such cases the value of occupational training certificates stems from their reliability and from the fact that they represent real capabilities demonstrated by workers regardless of the manner in which they acquired them, and with a high labour significance that employers appreciate.

On the other hand, quite a number of **enterprises** or groups of companies carry out training activities and offer certification of occupational competencies, either to improve their competitiveness or to meet international standards usually associated with the safety of persons. In the first category are, for example, companies of various sectors that have developed occupational competency models to take full advantage of their personnel resources and have consequently defined job profiles along which workers can obtain certificates to improve their possibilities of occupational mobility; competency certificates are here associated with training programmes and job promotion. In the second case are sectors where certification enables workers to perform tasks such as precision welders or household and industrial gas fitters.

Training and certification of occupational competencies are subjects of growing interest for **trade unions**. In the new society of information and knowledge certificates are an appropriate means for recognising the knowledge workers have and apply over and above their academic merits, giving practical experience its due. They can also be an excellent instrument to guide training efforts. One of the great advantages of certification based on competency standards can be the effective participation of workers' representatives in the establishment of the skills profiles that will serve as basis for training, evaluation and certification. In this connection, there has been a growing tendency to include vocational training among issues for collective bargaining².

The following diagram shows the different interests that converge upon certification:



² For a description of the experiences of the various actors in this field, see www.cinterfor.org.uy/competencias/observatorio

This wide range of interests calls for an institutionalised structure allowing for the performance of different roles, co-ordinated in such a manner as to meet criteria of quality, coverage and relevance. In general, it is here that the discussion about training and certification systems begins.

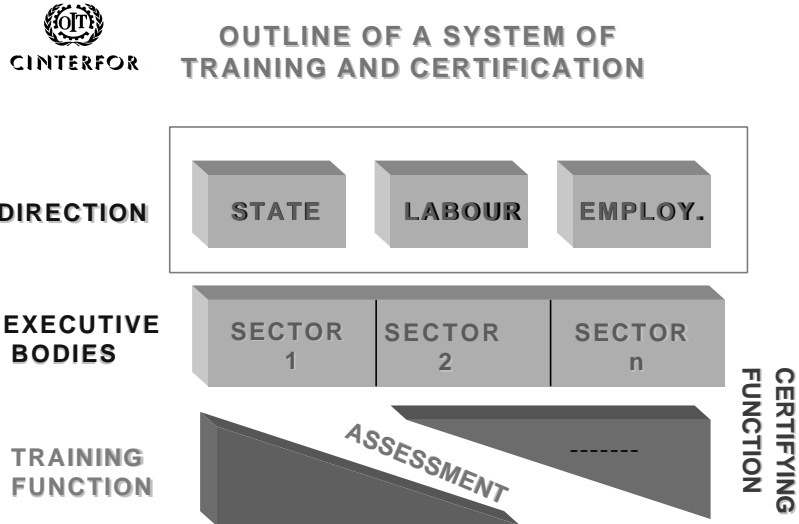
A certification system is a formally established institutional arrangement wherein the cycle is carried out of identifying, standardising, shaping up and evaluating the qualifications of workers³

Several experiences in the analysis and proposal of different forms of certification systems are under way in Latin America and the Caribbean. A certification system consists of four main stages: the identification of competencies, their standardisation, training and certification itself.

There are diverse methodological approaches and criteria to cover such stages, although several levels may be established as detailed in the following diagram.

A training and certification system comprises three levels: direction, executive and operational levels. The Direction level is usually a participative area in which workers, employers and the government sector set up the “rules of the game” that are usually sanctioned by legal norms. The Direction establishes the structure of the system and appoints those in charge of the functions of training, evaluating and certifying. Participation by the State is highly desirable because it provides an excellent opportunity to regulate aspects such as access, equity, quality and transparency.

At executive level, the organisation is nearly always sectoral and in most cases made up by the workers and employers of a specific occupational sector (for instance, forestry, automotive industry, leather and footwear manufacture, etc.). Methodologies are applied at this level for the identification of competencies and development of performance standards.



An essential function of the sectoral level is to check on the quality and relevance of the operational level implementing the training, evaluation and certification, which is fundamental to ensure that it meets the needs detected and that the certificates are reliable, i.e. that they effectively attest to what they purport to certify.

Training, evaluation and certification take place at the operational level. A substantive point of discussion is whether such functions should be carried out by different institutions or by the same organisation. That is precisely one of the assertions that we shall consider later in this document.

Training and certification experiences in the Latin American and Caribbean region include a diversity of actors as well as a wide range of institutional arrangements and pilot runs.

The social actors converge upon the need to improve the quality, extend the coverage and fine tune the relevance of training. Despite apparent similarities, each country has its own characteristics regarding institutions and traditions. There are many arguments around the operational design of certification schemes. We shall now proceed to take four contentions and analyse them in depth, assuming that they lack substantiation. Our main purpose is to provoke debate.

2

Four assertions about certification – all of them false

Many interesting discussions have taken place around the competencies approach in training and certification, and quite a few assertions have been made. We shall here analyse four of them to expose their lack of validity. Quite naturally, in no way do we consider that these lines bring the discussion to an end.

First assertion: Certificates are only issued at the end of a training activity, after students have overcome all tests.

For a long time certification was directly associated with credentials awarded upon the successful termination of a cycle of studies or the conclusion of an educational stage. Educational and training systems confer prestige upon a number of credentials which, in turn, endow their holders with a certain importance and social status. This was specially the case under the stable employment conditions that prevailed until the end of the 20th century.

We may recall that experience also used to be certified in the realm of labour. Barbagelata (1980)⁴ cites cases in which labour law prescribed the employers' obligation, upon termination of the labour contract, to issue a certificate about the workers' posts and responsibilities. Such obligation still exist in many national legislations and in fact opens the door to another aspect of certification, i.e. the recognition of knowledge acquired through experience, or learning in the exercise of a job.

³ Irigoín M., Vargas F. Competencia Laboral. Manual sobre conceptualización y aplicaciones a la educación en el sector salud. OPS/CINTERFOR/OIT. 2002.

⁴ Barbagelata, Héctor Hugo. La institucionalización de la certificación ocupacional y la promoción de los trabajadores. CINTERFOR/OIT, 1980.

However, the changes that have taken place in recent decades in the characteristics of work and the organisation of production have resulted in a recognition of the increasing complexity of human labour and the rapid variability of contents of the various occupations.

The new forms of work are not characterised by a stable set of instructions and ancillary tasks. Quite the contrary, they incorporate new variability elements calling for initiative and autonomy on the part of workers. The need to convey quality performance at work defies traditional certification procedures and becomes a good indicator of workers' real capabilities.

Several research projects carried out in the '70s showed a poor relationship between the real abilities of workers and their respective educational credentials⁵. To this we could add the following aspects increasingly to be found in work situations:

- Less stability
- The advent of new "social" skills and an ability to relate to others as key elements for successful performance
- Greater need for higher educational levels, enabling workers to handle mathematics, read and interpret texts, apply basic sciences
- Rapid evolution of techniques and technologies, resulting in the quick obsolescence of skills and abilities

In the same way as new reasons were identified for successful performance at work (occupational competencies), the need became apparent of developing new forms of certifying a job well done. What kind of certificate could show not just the successful completion of an educational cycle but a man's real capacity to perform at work?

Recognition of the training value of employment eventually led to the acceptance of a lifelong education perspective, i.e. that people learn and develop skills and qualifications as a result of their everyday experience. An open, transparent and public acknowledgment of such competencies may promote access to supplementary training programmes enabling workers to advance in their labour career and improve their mobility.

Certification is seen both as a process and a result. A process that implies complying with standards and defining the criteria to evaluate them. A result insofar as it derives from evaluation procedures, whether they lead to qualification or not⁶

At present, certificates may stand for:

- a) the termination of a training process
- b) a person's (previously evaluated) capacity for the practice of certain occupations that imply risk for public security or health
- c) possession of the competencies defined by a standard, regardless of where or when they were acquired

In the first instance the training programme must be updated with the competencies required by the world of labour, and evaluation has to refer to that updated programme. A training

⁵ McClelland, David. "Modificando la competencia más que la inteligencia", American Psychology Review, 1973.

⁶ Bouder, Annie and others. Certification and legibility of competencies. CEDEFOP, 2001.

programme based on competencies has to include all that a job requires in terms of competencies' profile.

In the second case there is usually a specialised body, closely related to the occupation in question, that defines the "quality of performance" in that sphere. Here certification enables individuals for the practice of the job. At the level of skilled work we may mention the occupations of precision welders for oil pipelines, paramedics, household gas fitters, where a diploma is essential to practice the trade.

The third bracket includes many new circumstances in which a competency standard is defined as well as instruments to evaluate whether candidates satisfactorily meet such a standard. Competencies acquired through practical experience are recognised. This is an all-inclusive concept that permits candidates to access programmes and join in the dynamics of a lifelong education.

Certification is not necessarily tied down to the completion of an educational or training process. It now relies on the demonstration of labour capabilities rather than attestation of hours of study or in-plant practice. Certificates are consequently getting away from the concept of "diplomas" in the sense that they do not strictly represent participation in an educational programme but define holders as competent workers in a given occupational area.

The growing interest in certification procedures shows how the different ways of acquiring competencies call for mechanisms to acknowledge know-how obtained outside formal teaching channels, and incorporate them into labour careers and lifelong education.

Along these lines, several modalities can make up an ongoing training process: it can begin with formal education, continuing with initial training (apprenticeship schemes, for example), certificates of on-the-job training, evaluation and the recognition of skills acquired at work, etc. The possibility of accepting and valuing such competencies is a major challenge for certification systems. In a broad perspective, the path offered by certification within the lifelong education philosophy helps people have access to better jobs.

Certification is the public, formal and official recognition of the labour capacity shown by workers, on the basis of an evaluation of their competencies in relation to a standard and not necessarily subject to the completion of an educational process⁷

Certification can make explicit the store of knowledge and abilities workers have developed by learning at work; this type of training is highly effective as it has direct bearing on labour needs. In fact, the most competitive companies world wide are prominent their concern for the training of their workers, among other things.

These corporations have realised that their most valuable asset is the knowledge they possess and they promote it through their organisational practices, their readiness to learn and their recognition of what they have learned. How this great asset that is the "knowledge capital" is to be valued is still under discussion, as is the way to reflect it in financial statements,

⁷ Irigoien M., Vargas F. Competencias Laborales. Manual de conceptualización y aplicaciones en el sector salud. OPS. CINTERFOR/OIT 2002.

bringing it in line with “market values”. People and their capabilities account for a company’s whole store of knowledge, and training is one of the best ways of adding to that stockpile.

Certificates become credible testimonials, an indication of workers’ capabilities which insofar as they are clearly conveyed to employers may save them precious resources in their search for qualified manpower.

Certification is increasingly seen as the outcome of a cycle that implies the definition of performance standards on the basis of occupational competency profiles. From those profiles training curricula are evolved and evaluation instruments for establishing whether candidates will eventually have access to certification.

A number of new qualities are emerging for analysing work situations and evaluating individuals. Adaptability, flexibility and mobility have become key occupational values. The economy requires a new concept for this situation: competencies seem to be more important than qualifications. Taking the new competencies into account raises the problem of how they can be acquired or recognised, an area where traditional certification models seem to fall short.

Source: “Certification and legibility of competencies”. Boudier, Coutrot et al. 2001.

Second assertion : Certification procedures intensify social exclusion

It has been considered that access to certificates would differentiate holders from non-holders. Nevertheless, certification processes under way have proved in time that they in fact facilitate the access of a greater number of workers to better jobs, result in better organisation of the various training offers, improve their relevance and make it easier to identify areas where training can be more effective.

Certificates act as value signs for their holders and for society at large. There is plentiful evidence in Latin America that unemployment is higher among those with fewer years of certified education or who lack specific training (and consequently have no certificates)⁸.

In their traditional concept certificates were a sign of “participation” in a programme. They are now evolving to testimonials of a “recognition” of capabilities. The more workers’ capabilities are established, the better will their chances be of recognition and acceptance in the labour market.

Certificates have traditionally been good indicators both for employers and employees as to the possibilities of reaching a labour contract. Certificates themselves do not seem to be the problem, but their accessibility.

Links remain strong between diplomas, the institutions that issue them and the status of their holders. In that respect more opportunities should be offered to candidates for demonstrating

⁸ In any event there is an effect whereby those with credentials have the edge on those devoid of them, even in equal conditions of experience and competition. It is the so-called “credential effect”.

their competencies. Certification mechanisms should be open and accessible so that rather than a screening barrier they may be seen as means for promotion.

Certification procedures normally cover only the formal economy. However, the extent of informality in the Latin American region and the fact the 40% of all new jobs are generated in what economic studies conventionally call the informal sector has given rise to discussions about the exclusion of informal workers from the benefits of certification.

Nevertheless, nothing prevents certification mechanisms from including lower educational level workers and employees engaging in unskilled activities. Quite the contrary, the informal sector is becoming increasingly integrated with formal enterprises through subcontracting, and its growing share in the countries' economies makes it necessary to upgrade its levels of competitiveness and quality. In several countries of the European Union, certification programmes favour the inclusion of low-skill workers as a method for incorporating them into training cycles.

Although it is true that not all the informal sector enjoys such opportunities, it is also the case that training with good programmes and giving more access to the advantages of competencies' evaluation does not contradict the principles of training-certification or the recognition of competencies.

The disconnectedness of informal sectors is not a problem that certification systems may aggravate. Quite the contrary: an effective, inclusive training programme for the informal sector can, in exchange for short-term palliatives, grant a much valued and explanatory testimonial about the individuals' labour capabilities. The State can play a fundamental role in this direction, by providing a framework for the ongoing education of these informal labourers.

In such a context, a well valued and accepted occupational competency certificate is a good passport to get better jobs, improving the possibilities for decent work.

An even more effective way of divesting certification of the shortcoming of its supposedly sectoral duality is to have a look at the capabilities normally included in evaluated and certified contents, such as:

- Competencies deriving from basic knowledge (reading writing, arithmetic, chemistry, physics, etc).
- Technical competencies applied at work and implying the use of tools, equipment, participation in transformation processes, etc.
- Competencies of a social nature such as capacity for relating to others, engaging in teamwork, co-operation etc.

From this point of view, jobs in the informal economy do not fail to apply combinations of the three types of competencies above, and the success of any undertaking will to a great extent depend on their degree of development. The certification model thus becomes a good foundation for the promotion of decent jobs, and the use of better labour and technological practices in the small and medium companies that are typical of informality. It also makes it easier for workers to go over to employment in sectors with a more elaborate economic structure.

A point not to be overlooked are the different possibilities of accessing the system and moving about in it for workers with, for instance, complete basic education, as opposed to those with only two or three years' schooling. In such cases training and education systems should develop guidance mechanisms enabling participants to read the scheme's navigation codes and operate in it. This would also include the possibility of covering the costs of tests and certificates (if any) for those that cannot afford them.

A recent study of the United Kingdom certification system recommended that certification standards and the certificates themselves should be considered "public property" insofar as possible. As such, the price paid for a certificate (some 10 pounds sterling) should be abolished, going over to a system based on direct government contributions⁹

The most sensitive aspect of access to certification is precisely its financial cost for candidates. An imperfectly designed financing scheme might favour some of them to the detriment of others. All possibilities are open in this connection to implement active employment policies and facilitate access to those unable to pay for certificates.

Third assertion: In certifications systems, institutions that train should be separate from those that evaluate and certify.

Routine application of the juridical maxim that "one cannot be judge and interested party at the same time" has little to do with the validity of certification and is far from being universally true.

Certification models have followed the evolution of educational practices, which in turn have derived from cultural values and heritage accumulated through the years. Each system expresses its beliefs in what a training model should attain. Transfer of such convictions from one country to another without adequate review may not always meet with success.

In fact there is no single optimal form of organising an institutional training model. What they all have in common is often a search for better quality, coverage and relevance. There are obviously different ways of attaining such ideals. In studying the institutionalisation adopted by various countries, that are often taken as inspiring prototypes, we should bear in mind that they are the result of culturally assimilated practices by their educational and training spheres.

It is also important not to lose sight of the fact that recent reorganisations and concerns about training systems stem from diagnostic studies that have usually revealed some of the following:

- A proliferation of low-quality, ill co-ordinated training offers with little bearing on national objectives.
- Lack of proportion between the training offer and the needs of the economy expressed by its demand for skilled workers.
- Low level or loss of competitiveness of the economy often reflected in low levels of training and poor productivity.
- Signs of exhaustion of training systems in use.

⁹ Report of the Independent review of the UK national occupational standards programme. QCA London. September 2001.

In a quick historical appraisal we find the first references to training and certification systems based on occupational capabilities at different dates in Europe. For example, in Germany training standards were set in 1937 for the dual mode; in France training references were established towards 1950; in Spain occupational laws were promulgated later, in the '70s, and finally, in England, national vocational standards were adopted in the '80s.

The introduction of occupational benchmarks into training programmes shifted the stress from academic contents towards performance at work. While traditional education courses dispensed mainly academic contents, vocational training programmes were based on a detailed description of the tasks and operations pertaining to a work post. At present, the new standards governing training programmes describe competent work as follows: a number of abilities and attitudes jointly mobilised to solve a particular situation in occupational performance.

Additionally, as a result of the growing number of both public and private training offers, the quality level of certificates differs requiring, among other things, mechanisms to ensure a match between training and the needs of employers. Several countries have resorted to evolving standards – with the participation of workers and employers, often under active policy measures by the public authority – in an effort to raise and unify quality levels in occupational training.

Recent research in the European Union has shown the differences among the different national certification models¹⁰ of Germany, Belgium, France and England. Although all these countries share the same goal of a training model capable of responding well to the demand of enterprises and harbouring the greatest possible number of youngsters and adults with training needs, the paths they have chosen are different. In the following table the most distinctive features of the various country cases are compared.

¹⁰ Boudier, Annie, et al. Certification and legibility of competencies. CEDEFOP 2001.

SOME FEATURES OF CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS IN COUNTRIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

FEATURE	GERMANY	FRANCE	SPAIN	ENGLAND
Main characteristics	Enterprise-centre alternating training (dual system) Enterprise responsible for training	Education and VT regulated by Ministry of Education. Recognition of previous adult learning. Various certification programmes in enterprises	Three training sub-systems: <i>Regulated training</i> in educational cycle; <i>Occupational training</i> for the unemployed; <i>Ongoing training</i> for workers	National framework of competency levels governed by a National Authority in educational and occupational aspects
Governing body	Federal VT Institute (BIBB)	Ministry of Education	National Qualifications Institute (INCUAL)	Qualifications and Curricular Authority (QCA)
Standards	National standards set by the BIBB	National benchmarks set by the Ministry of Education	Occupational profiles established by Royal Decree	Standards established under the leadership of corporate chambers
Strengths	Occupational practice. Enterprise-led training. Single national standards	Highly reliable governance (public and national in scope). Integrated education and VT	National benchmarks focalised on different customers. VT incorporated to educational system	Comprehensive, integrating national framework. Education and VT merged together.
Critical aspects	The efficiency of the dual system is questioned due to its narrow focus on a single practice	Employers are critical of diplomas, that they think have low applicability due to a prevalence of academic contents	Need for greater co-ordination among initial, ongoing and occupational training systems	Excess of qualifications and descriptions, in an effort to be too objective
Historical background	First regulations for industrial training, 1925. Dual training, 1964	First School of Arts and Crafts, 1803. Establishment of CAP, 1919	Technical Institutes established in 1925. First certificates issued in mid-70s. General Education Law passed in late 80s	Private training initiatives, 1878 (City and Guilds) Competency standards, late 80s

Sources: Author's table based on: QCA Report of the independent review of the UK national occupational standards programme 2001; CEDEFOP, Certification and legibility of competencies, 2001; Fretwell David, A framework of defining and assessing occupational and training standards in developing countries, 2001.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, in Latin America there is a wide range of applications regarding certification. By way of example we submit the following table where only some experiences are included, comparing their intent and principal actors.

FEATURES OF SOME CERTIFICATION EXPERIENCES IN LATIN AMERICA

IDENTIFICATION	Programme of Occupational Quality Certification in the Tourism Sector, Brazil	Pilot Programme of occupational competencies' certification, Chile	Council for Standardisation and Certification of Occupational Competencies, Mexico	Vocational Training Institutions ¹¹ (Several countries)
Leadership	Private sector: Hospitality Institute	Public and private sectors: National Training and Employment Service (SENCE) Fundación Chile	Public sector: Labour Secretariat	Public sector: INA, INTECAP, INSAFORP, INFOP, SENA, INFOTEP. Private sector: SENAI, SENAC
Coverage	Hotel trades and tourism	Tourism, Construction, Mining National level	National; Occupations according to demand	Sectoral, by areas of attention
Standards	Based on Institute's own functional analysis	Based on functional analysis	Based on functional analysis	Based on functional analysis and DACUM
Critical aspects	Transferability. Greater trade union participation. Accessibility for the unemployed.	Great co-ordination efforts of public-private sectors	Wide offer of standards, low demand for certificates. Integration with VT	Becoming integrated with public employment and training policies
Strengths	High credibility among employers. Tripartite National Certification Council	Credibility deriving from actors involved. Lifelong educational approach	Credibility High transferability Private sector participation	Credibility Technical proficiency of VTIs Association with the VT process
Historical	Interest in competitiveness supported by international development banking. Start up: 1999	Interest in competitiveness and efficiency of training. Support provided by development banking and national resources. Start up: 2000	National competitiveness diagnosis. NAFTA perspective. Total support by Government and development banks. Start up: 1996	Interest in raising VT supply, quality and coverage. At the request of employers' sector. Start up: 1967

Source: Author's table based on institutional documentation of the experiences included and on his own personal concepts.

Let us now add a further consideration based on the old methodological rule that first things come first. In other words, the existence of a third party certification model presupposes the existence of a second party ruling, and in consequence there must also exist a first party model. First party certification is granted by the body or institution dispensing the training, which has the mechanisms to ensure the quality, transparency and validity of the diploma. Nearly all vocational training institutions in Latin America fall within that category: they carry out training, evaluation and certification functions.

¹¹ This column is not intended to include all cases; it only shows several countries where we all know that VTIs implement certification programmes based on competency profiles.

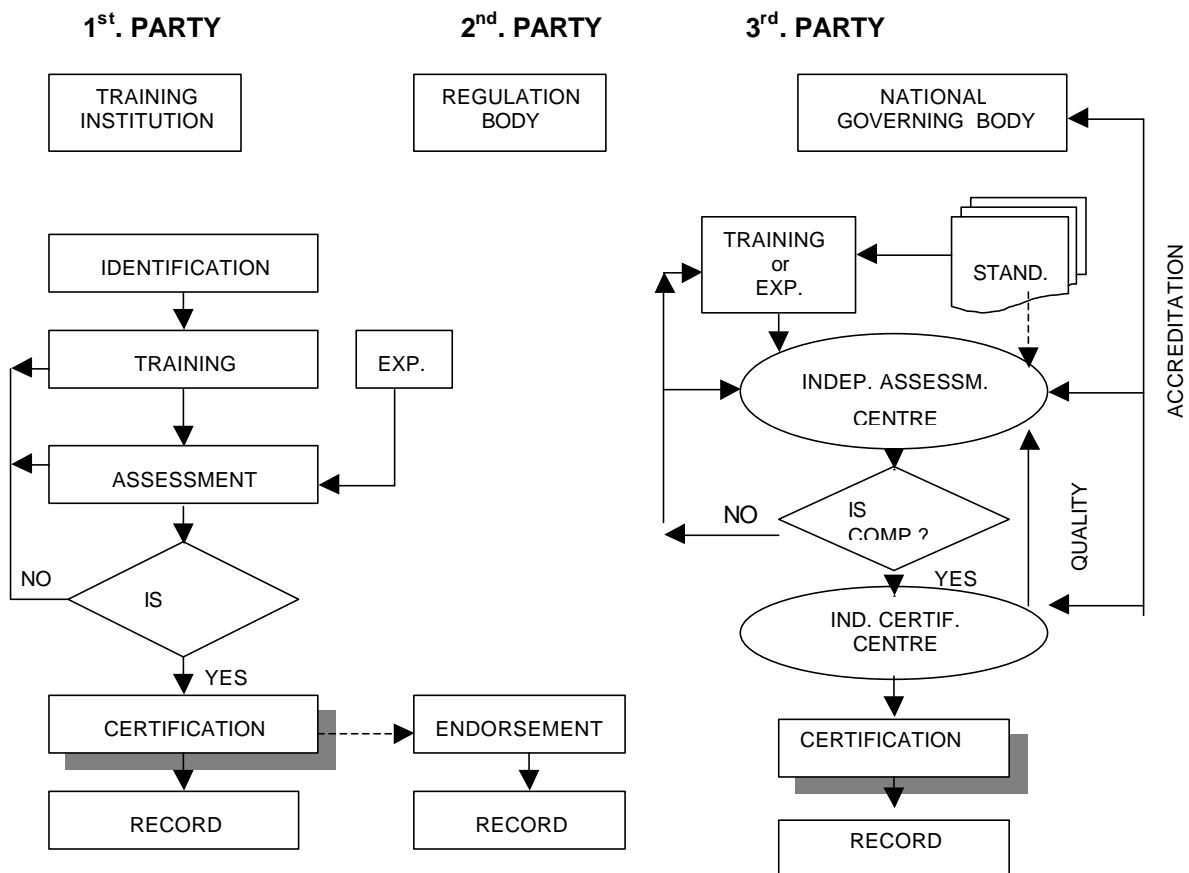
Second stage certification models usually occur within the formal education system: end-of-course diplomas require the signature of some second party authority, normally the Ministry of Education. This means that that authority has quality verification mechanisms that it applies to issue the certificates in question.

In third party models, by contrast, there is a clear-cut separation of functions, and especially of implementing bodies. On the one hand there are those that train, on the other those that evaluate and finally the ones that certify. It all started in 18th century England when the State tried to regulate the country's training system and took a leading role in guilds and corporations, setting the rules of the game in which the latter retained their certifying prerogatives.

In Great Britain it was not until the late 19th century , with the promulgation of the Technical Education Act of 1889, that organisations like the “City and Guilds of London Institute” were authorised to make agreements on technical education and the certification thereof, working together with local councils. Certification was left to the initiative of a wide range of examining boards – for which it was a business – but they tried to establish it for all occupations.

Source: CEDEFOP, certification and legibility of competencies, 2001.

FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PARTY CERTIFICATION ARRANGEMENTS



Source: Author's diagram

Fourth assertion: Certification systems normally solve the problems that have been traditionally attributed to training institutions

It is often assumed that a certification system by itself improves quality and becomes a good remedy for problems attributed to training institutes.

This is not really the case, although the organisational fabric of training institutes (especially third party ones) has built-in verification mechanisms for quality assurance. The competency standards on which certification is based do not by themselves guarantee an improvement of the intrinsic quality of training.

By intrinsic quality of training we mean those attributes of the training process resulting from all inputs applied, such as teaching aids, proficiency of instructors and general educational environment.

An activity like training has a high educational and pedagogic content which is not to be confused with mere coaching for the performance of a particular skill.

When companies are not a good place to learn in, the competencies and abilities acquired by workers through experience decay and become minimal. A certification programme for workers that have not had training opportunities in their job is not likely to be very successful. Certification processes act as an excellent method for detecting training needs, channelling training efforts and promoting candidates' occupational careers.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, National Training Agencies, operating within a standardised training and certification system, adhere to certain characteristics to implement their programmes in close co-ordination with manpower demand. For instance, they have tripartite consulting councils, they bring trade unions and employers together for the development of standards, prepare occupational analyses and curricular designs, implement programmes based on abilities to develop rather than on time of tuition, they apply competency evaluations and recommend candidates for certification to the National Council for Technical and Vocational Training .

Source: Gamerding, George. Calificaciones profesionales. Experiencias del Caribe. Cinterfor/OIT. Boletín 149. Montevideo 2000,

Certificates are excellent indicators of the results of a good training process, at institutions or on the job. These Latin American programmes call attention to the need to review and make up for shortcomings in elementary education, and define the standards that underlie good curricula, perhaps with more emphasis than usual on building up institutional structures for certification.

In a recent study of competency standards in England, many respondents referred to an excessive concern with detailed descriptions of how occupational aspects should be, without sufficient training backing. They also testified to the interest of workers in obtaining certificates¹².

¹² QCA. Report of the independent review of the UK national occupational standards programme. 2001.

In the design of certification systems, assumptions should be weighed against the realities that experience gradually unveils. We might suppose, for example, that all public and private agents would provide better training if standards were defined for application to all their programmes. Certification would in this manner encourage the improvement of training quality, it would promote fresh offers and facilitate the access of new participants.

Experience has shown, however, that quality improvement and the attraction of workers to certification are not automatic. Certification does not seem to provide a clear answer for all sectors and all occupations¹³. It tends to be more successful when it is guided by the initial interest of employers and workers, and it is closely connected with labour realities and the management of human resources. In the United States, for example, the strategy is to begin with a voluntary association scheme with the backing and commitment of interested representative firms. In the English-speaking Caribbean certification has been promoted with a regional or sectoral emphasis, through CARICOM or the Caribbean Hotel Association, for instance. In Mexico applications to solve corporate training and personnel management needs have been quite successful.

A training agency can hardly raise the quality of its teaching staff, generate and store applied knowledge (curricular design, teaching materials, evaluation techniques and new technologies), without a stable institutional structure organised for the production and accumulation of training-related know-how. The quality of training is unlikely to improve in an atomised environment of calls for bids and financing often dependent on external, sporadic support.

By contrast, when training and certification programmes have been adequately institutionalised, there is usually methodological support for areas such as teachers' training and the preparation of curricula. Training institutes can then bend their energies to the task of quality improvement¹⁴.

Certification systems should not lose sight of the process involved and lay too much emphasis on testimonials (the outcome thereof). A good examination is the result of a good training process, regardless of whether it has taken place in the enterprise or the training centre. Certificates are good indicators of results – their role matters as such, depending on reliability and validity. Good training practices, the updating of programmes, a proficient teaching staff, the frequent renewal of contents and the supply of good materials are always essential to attain the final objective of good performance and, consequently, a quality certificate.

Where is stress to be laid, then?

Developed countries have many years' experience in the design and use of training and education systems, they have managed to build up a stockpile of applied knowledge in the field, and when they set up certification systems they do not detract from institutional structures. On the contrary, they optimise them through quality mechanisms like certificates.

¹³ In the English system most certifications are concentrated at low and intermediate competency levels. In the Mexican case there is a high demand for them in information science occupations. In neither case is a high percentage of the standards offered used in certification processes.

¹⁴ In many cases, when Training Institutes work together with private collaborating centres, they share curricula and jointly support teachers' training and methodologies as part of their relationship.

It is much easier to devise and introduce a certification system taking advantage of already existing institutional structures, modifying and perfecting them to build upon them, than to overthrow them and try to implant new forms that are foreign to educational tradition and culture.

If we have a sound training system, if curricula are prepared on the basis of job profiles jointly devised and standardised by employers and workers, if the actors involved take part in defining the level and characteristics of certificates and if – desirably – the State has created a stable framework for all this to function, we shall be nearer to a reliable, equitable and socially valued certificate, as the natural result of good training.

Blind application of the principles embodied in other models does not seem the best solution either. Certification systems are deeply rooted in the different countries' experiences, traditions and institutional evolution. It is therefore advisable to consider a process of analysis and **adaptation** of the best practices of a foreign model, rather than **adoption** of them.

A point of discussion frequently connected with the above is the matter of who trains, who evaluates and who certifies?

In that respect, experiences in Latin America are showing that the most important thing is not really who does things, but how they are done. In other words, a good evaluation process can perfectly well be carried out by the same institution or body that imparted the training. Reliability, impartiality and validity have to be guaranteed, but it is also necessary to have an appropriate teaching environment, adequate links with firms and enterprises, and knowledge of evaluation. In all such aspects training institutions and centres have great advantages.

“A certifying body may provide training; if it does so it must clearly show how it manages the separation between evaluation and training to ensure confidentiality, objectiveness and impartiality”¹⁵

This argument needs to be introduced in the discussion about adoption or adaptation, as very often the logic of certification of goods and processes is automatically transferred to the area of attesting to and recognising the capacities of persons. Training institutions are very well equipped to implement training processes. The critical aspect is whether they can properly differentiate between regulatory and executive functions.

The role of the State in determining quality levels and paving the road for national training frameworks suggests the need to have a governing body to regulate ways and means of access, establishment of standards, equivalencies and other aspects of lifelong training scenarios. This governing body would be in charge of enforcing compliance with verification and quality levels by all executing agencies.

¹⁵ Draft of ISO standard 17024 “General requirements for organisations operating systems for the certification of persons”. Submitted to the approval of the Evaluation Committee, December 2000.

The certification of abilities is an important tool in this process, as it solves an information problem by making the quality and quantity of workers' skills observable by their possible employers. Nevertheless, certification requires the firm institutional participation of enterprises, workers and trade unions in the design of accreditation contents and mechanisms.

Source: Vázquez, Gustavo. Capacitación fe la fuerza laboral en América Latina: ¿Qué debe hacerse?. Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo 2001.

A prevailing factor in these considerations is the resolute participation of enterprises, workers and governments in the design and implementation of governing and executive activities. A comprehensive and effective integration of efforts has greater impact on quality than mere regulation and allocation of responsibilities.

There are three essential elements for a good certificate, whatever the institutional model adopted:

1. Good quality training, properly updated and based on job profiles has evolved with the participation of all actors concerned
2. Agreement on the measures required to ensure the quality of certificates. This implies the way in which evaluation is effected, and participation of workers and employers in analysing the performance of certified workers
3. An institutional design clearly indicating who carries out the functions of standardisation, evaluation and certification, without necessarily implying that they are to be in separate and different bodies, but stressing the independence of each one of those functions.

In August 2003 the educational institutions of the Vocational Training Sector of the Netherlands shall become fully responsible for examinations in the courses they themselves impart. An external evaluation will supervise compliance with this task. A national centre of evaluating quality will be created for that purpose and national standards will be defined that all educational institutions shall have to observe in order to obtain a license¹⁶.

A governing body for certification, for training, or for both things?

In general, all countries that have adopted standards as a basis for training and competency recognition processes have an explicit and regulated public policy for that purpose, some specialised agency in which the social actors take part and institutional arrangements with training, evaluation and certification bodies.

The motivations for setting up certification systems are closely related to national concerns with education (Ministries of Education) or employment (Ministries of Labour) and are part and parcel of public training and employment policies.

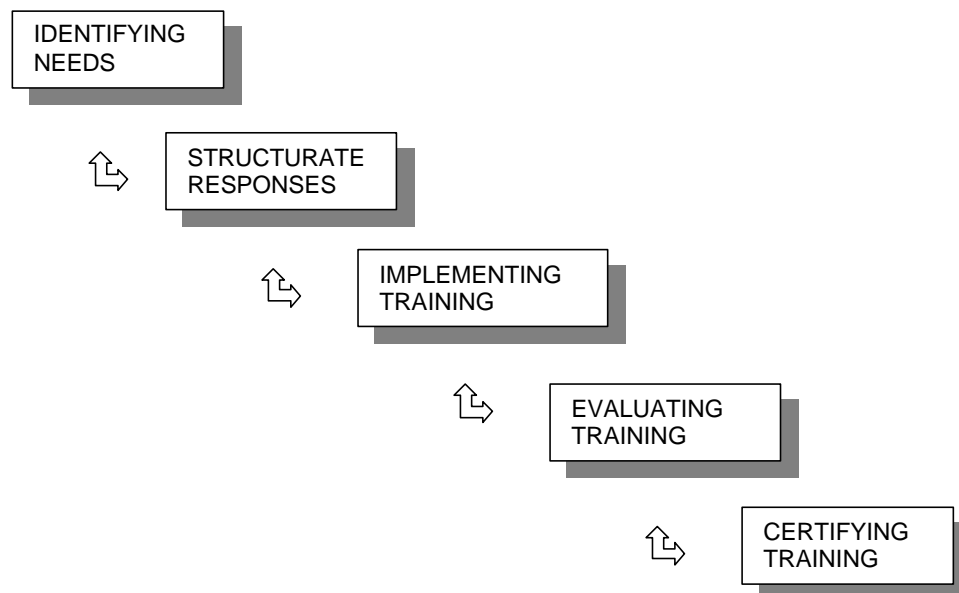
¹⁶ CEDEFOP. Developments in the vocational training systems in Member States from September 2001 to February 2002. www.cedefop.eu.int

**GOVERNING BODIES OF SOME TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS
AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THEM**

FEATURE	MEXICO	UNITED STATES	GREAT BRITAIN	SPAIN
STATE AGENCY	Ministry of Labour	Office of Education and Labor	Department of Education and Labour	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
IDENTIFICATION	Council for the Standardisation and Certification of Competencies CONOCER	National Standards and Skills Bureau NSSB	National Qualifications and Curricula Authority QCA	National Vocational Training Council National Qualifications Institute INCUAL
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	Tripartite 6 members from Government 6 employers' representatives 6 workers' delegates	Led by the Labor Department 12 members appointed by the US President 12 members elected by the US Congress	A Directive Council of 10 members from the education sector. A Curricula and Evaluation Committee (12 members from the education sector). A Qualifications Committee (15 employers' and workers' representatives)	Chaired by: Min. of Education, Min. of Labour. 17 Members from Ministries of Economy Defence Industry Agriculture. 17 Members from autonomous communities. 19 Members from employers' organizations 19 Members from trade unions
COVERAGE	National	Sectoral National	National	National

In Latin America and the Caribbean various training institutions have led the way in establishing national certification systems or sectoral certification arrangements. As opposed to North America or even to Europe the region has an institutional structure usually based on tripartite participation at the level of boards of directors. In fact, the organisational chart of most institutions responds more or less to the following graphic description:

BASIC FUNCTIONS OF LATIN AMERICAN TRAINING INSTITUTIONS



These functions are performed with a high degree of social legitimisation resulting from the participation of all actors at directive level and in many cases also in the stages of identification of training needs, evaluation and certification. Very often planning departments deal with the detection of needs, other areas concentrate on the design of programmes utilising the institute's capacity to generate knowledge applied to training, teaching material and aids, evaluation material and space devoted to training.

Training centres have typically been the structures in charge of dispensing training in the region and many VTIs have developed their own institutional evaluation mechanisms, although there is room for improvement there. Separate departments have dealt with certification procedures, and employers and workers have been involved in evaluating the impact of training.

Institutional arrangements intrinsic in VTIs can comply with the quality criteria required for certification. Participation by interested actors must be ensured, that is to say, those whose views may matter in judging the efficiency and transparency of the certification services.

If VTIs refine the use of the institutional tools they already have, nothing prevents them from stamping a quality hallmark on the certifications they issue. The credibility and confidence they enjoy is an achievement resting upon knowledge accumulated from experiences that in some countries reach as far as 60 years back. However, certificates enjoy prestige only when quality has been preserved; otherwise it will be necessary to find new arrangements to meet the demands of users.

A good training process, with the necessary materials and qualified instructors, updated curricula and adequate training spaces can serve as the basis for a transparent and reliable

certification procedure. In the pursuit of that objective we may first and foremost consider what we can do to upgrade training, and to have good programmes and methods for recognising competencies acquired at work

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